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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000271

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/05/2016

TAGS: [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [TN](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: TONGA'S PROPOSED IRAQ DEPLOYMENT: STATE OF PLAY

REF: SUVA 262

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.5 (B,D)

Summary

1. (C) Planning is well under way for a second deployment of Tonga Defense Service (TDS) troops to Iraq. A required step is Tonga Defense Board approval. Reportedly, the Board will decide on July 14. TDS Commander Uta'atu and Foreign/Defense Minister Tu'a are enthusiastic. They presume the King or Crown Prince (as Regent) will be, too. In the past, and probably still, that would decide the matter. However, new Prime Minister Sevele, a commoner, has been instituting reforms, with the Crown Prince's encouragement, aiming to mollify pro-democracy advocates. Sevele has signaled discomfort about the proposed deployment, sensing the Tongan public would oppose it. Uta'atu and, reportedly, Tu'a remain confident that traditional power relationships will hold and the Board will approve. The outcome will be an indicator of how much actual power has flowed from the palace to the PM in recent months. End Summary.

Deployment decisions and democracy in Tonga

2. (C) Tonga's Defense Board is to consider shortly a second deployment of a company of TDS troops to Iraq. The Defense Board consists of the King (or his Regent) and the Cabinet, with the Commander TDS as secretary. Traditionally, the Defense Minister formally proposes, Cabinet observes, and the King decides. The King supported the previous deployment in 2004. However, governance in Tonga has since become more complicated. A pro-democracy movement has gained traction. The King is old, ailing, and spending most of his time in New Zealand. The Crown Prince, often now Prince Regent, recently appointed the first commoner Prime Minister in over a century, Fred Sevele. Sevele has instituted several reforms and foresees a more democratic system. The Crown Prince accepts the usefulness of reform, in principle, while intending for the monarch to retain a number of royal prerogatives, including oversight of the TDS (see reftel).

TDS and Defense Minister on board; Crown Prince interested

3. (C) During a June 27-29 visit to Tonga, the Ambassador and DATT discussed the proposed Iraq deployment with key figures. TDS Commander Uta'atu, who traveled to Washington, Tampa, and Baghdad in April with Foreign/Defense Minister Tu'a and the DATT to gauge prospects for the deployment, remains fully supportive. He warned, though, that "the politicians" may need further persuasion. Minister Tu'a was away from Tonga during the visit, but Uta'atu said he also remains on board. When we raised the subject with the Crown

Prince, he understood the arguments for deployment and seemed interested; however, he noted that the issue has not yet reached the Defense Board so he has not been fully briefed.

PM has serious political doubts

¶4. (C) When we raised the deployment issue with Prime Minister Sevele, he was clearly more up to speed than when we had first broached it with him in early April. At that time he appeared somewhat unenthusiastic but admitted he had not been briefed. This time, he informed us that he is troubled by the thought of deploying Tongans to Iraq at a time when Japan and others are withdrawing their troops. He is worried about intense political fall-out if a Tongan were to become a casualty. He mentioned that "two or three" of his Cabinet colleagues also have expressed concerns. He admitted discomfort at so frankly conveying such views, but he said he didn't want the USG to be surprised if Tonga, in the end, declines to participate again.

Comments: positive decision remains likely, but...

¶5. (C) The U.S. and the TDS have invested considerable effort into ramping up the second TDS deployment. During our meetings last week, we lobbied hard, using the array of available arguments. At this early stage of Tonga's democratic evolution, the Monarch retains the power to order such a deployment. Colonel Uta'atu believes "the PM's opinion does not have much bearing on the direction of the military." Assuming the Defense Board operates in the traditional fashion, Foreign/Defense Minister Tu'a will propose, nobody will challenge, and the King or the Crown Prince as Regent will authorize.

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¶6. (C) PM Sevele's powers are beginning to strengthen, in good part because of his close relationship with the Crown Prince who wants to co-opt pro-democracy sentiments via modest reforms. There was reportedly great public nervousness during the six-month entirety of the first TDS Iraq deployment, which resulted in no casualties. Pro-democracy advocates would almost certainly attempt to accent dissatisfaction with the monarchy. The PM's political antennae are much more sensitive than those in the royal family, but even the royal family is developing a degree of sensitivity to "people power" pressure. They caved to a public-service strike last summer. Given Sevele's clear discomfort with the deployment concept, it is likely that he will attempt, at least behind the scenes, to influence the Defense Board decision negatively.

¶7. (C) Colonel Uta'atu, aware of some politicians' concerns, asked us to attempt to convince PM Sevele of the new deployment's merits. On hearing the PM's worried response, Uta'atu met on July 3 with the PM and with Foreign/Defense Minister Tu'a (who had by then returned to Tonga). Uta'atu confirmed to Sevele details about the deployment, including the training and equipment the USG is preparing to deliver to the TDS and the care taken in selecting the deployment's location within Iraq, all to help ensure a successful outcome. We are told Uta'atu also stressed the importance of the U.S.-Tonga mil-mil relationship and argued the need continually to strengthen the bond. The PM reportedly replied that he appreciated Uta'atu's comments, including the "criticism."

¶8. (C) Colonel Uta'atu expects the Defense Board to meet July 14, and he remains confident that the Board will OK the deployment. That is the most likely scenario, but not the only possible one these days. The Board's decision will provide a practical signal of just how much, or how little, power the PM has attained in Tonga's evolving monarchical system.

DINGER